

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

TSRC

Third Sector Research Centre

**Understanding ‘below the radar’
organisations and activities in the Third
Sector**

A Discussion Paper

**Third Sector Research Centre
Below the Radar Work Stream
Reference Group
7 July 2009**

**Additional comments and feedback –
please email a.j.mccabe@bham.ac.uk**

Understanding 'below the radar' organisations and activities in the Third Sector

A Discussion Paper

Introduction

The following paper is based on discussions at the Third Sector Research Centre's 'Below the Radar' research stream first reference group meeting on 7th July 2009. This grouping brings together key agencies with an interest in community sector organisations and activities – including third sector national network organisations (Community Sector Coalition/Urban Forum), those with a focus on community development (Federation for Community Development Learning, Community Development Exchange, Community Development Foundation), academics and independent researchers, funding bodies (Barrow Cadbury Trust and City Parochial Foundation and Trust for London), policy makers (Communities and Local Government, DEFRA and Office of the Third Sector) as well as those representing particular communities of interest (Voices4Change, Runnymede Trust, London Women's Resource Centre and the Faith Based Regeneration Network). In total some 36 organisations, Government Departments and academic institutions etc are nominated representatives on the Below the Radar Reference Group which aims to:

- Inform the Third Sector Research Centre's work with small community based organisations
- Comment on emerging research findings
- Promote discussion on, and the dissemination of, research in this field.

'Below the Radar' Organisations and Activities: Towards a Definition

Although 'below/under the radar' has become a common phrase in the academic and practice literature in the Third Sector there is no common or shared definition of the term. For the purposes of this discussion paper 'below the radar' organisations and activities based around localities, communities of interest, faith based and social/cultural issues include:

- Those groups which are not formally registered with the Charity Commission, Companies House or other regulatory bodies
 - Organisations with no – or very limited – income (A common feature in the available material suggests that such groups have annual incomes of less than £10-£25,000 per annum
 - Informal, but regular, activity where there is no formal organisational structure
- Groups which are registered with regulatory bodies – but may be below 'other forms of radar' – eg the policy and influence 'radar', information technology 'radar'.

Discussion Paper: Purpose

The purpose of the current paper is to seek further comment and feedback on the topics discussed by the 'below the radar' reference group. These were:

- A general overview of the current issues faced by, and future challenges for, below the radar organisations in the sector
- Researching 'below the radar' organisations: key research questions, methods and issues.

In addition, there was a more informal exercise which asked participants their views on myths about small community based organisations, gaps in knowledge about this part of the Third Sector and to what extent do small organisations 'opt out off' or are excluded from, the policy and funding arena?

A summary of the debates is provided in the following tables.

Exercise 1 : Current Issues

What are the current issues faced by, and future challenges for, below the radar organisations and activities in the third sector?

Current Issues

- Increased competition for resources – and funding criteria (in procurement and commissioning contracts) which increasingly exclude small groups.
- Current policy statements supporting the sector can be seen as helpful – but what do they mean 'on the ground'? Need for longer term funding recognised by government – but still reliance on short term grants for small groups/
- Short term grants seen as a way of promoting sustainable organisations. Is there any evidence that this is the case – especially for BME organisations?
- There is an overwhelming need for capacity building support – but what kind of support?
- What motivates people now to 'get involved'? Will this be the same – or different – in 5 years time? Little is known about motivations in entirely volunteer based organisations?
- Does becoming 'on the radar' in terms of funding and policy agendas distort small community organisations/divert them from their purpose?

Future Challenges

- Does the economic down-turn mean that there will be more community based activity – or less as people act in more self-interested ways and/or have less time/fewer resources for community activity?
- Continued decline in grant funding: what will be the impact on small (service delivery) groups in the contract and procurement culture?
- What will happen to the advocacy and campaigning role of small/below the radar organisations?
- How will small groups respond to the service delivery agenda? May be enthusiastic – but are they best placed to deliver public services? What is the balance between encouraging small groups to deliver services and regulation/protection issues for service users (eg child protection/safeguarding vulnerable adults)? Will regulation stifle small voluntary organisations and increase the divides between the 'have's and the have not's' in the sector?
- What will be the role of small groups in the equalities agenda be – and in tackling increasing racism? What impact will single identity group funding have on the sector tackling these issues? Will progressive community development lose out to more

<p>extreme/right wing forms of voluntary action?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issues of power and power imbalances need to be addressed. Will Government really listen to communities?
<p>Please add other comments, observations or questions here:</p>

The debate on current issues and challenges highlighted two questions for further discussion and investigation:

- Does the term ‘below the radar’ help us understand small community organisations any better – or does it add to the already confusing language of the third sector – non-governmental organisations, social enterprises, community businesses, the voluntary/community sector?
- Identifying the future challenges for some small community/below the radar groups was problematic because so little was known about some parts of this ‘sector’ – eg rural groups/inter-faith activity, arts and cultural societies. How might this be addressed in future and knowledge fed into mainstream voluntary organisations and the policy arena?
- Is ‘below the radar’ a deficit model of community action: *“They are small (groups) because they are unprofessional or ineffective – rather than they are small because this is what they want and need to be?”*

Exercise 2: Myths, Gaps and ‘Radars’

This exercise explored views on myths, and gaps in our knowledge about, below the radar organisations and activities and invited participants to explore why some community groups might be ‘below the radar’>

Myths about ‘below the radar’ groups	Gaps in our knowledge about ‘below the radar’ groups	Why might groups be/want to stay ‘below the radar’
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All community activity is good • All community activity is inclusive • Such groups want to get bigger – small isn’t beautiful • Such groups are unprofessional • Small/below the radar groups have a lot in common • Small groups are inherently democratic • Below the radar groups are the 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who gets involved, why and what do they do? • The social/economic contribution of below the radar groups/activity • Issues of class and ethnicity – how do these play out in below the radar activity? • Why can’t small groups be supported rather than researched? • Are there differences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bureaucracy! • Keeping their independence • Lack of capacity to organise or influence • Mistrust of the state – wanting to keep a distance from state bodies • Because of power relationships below the radar groups are both excluded and opt-out • Some are struggling to deliver services – but drop out

<p>'wannabe' voluntary sector</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That it is possible to quantify below the radar groups/activities 	<p>in such activities between established and newer communities?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What makes below the radar activity thrive in some communities and not others? • What makes small community groups 'sustainable'? • How groups are resourced (other than grants), their skills and knowledge and how this gets passed on (or not!) • The rural dimension 	<p>because of legal complexity of doing so?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who wants small community groups 'on the radar' and why? • If community activity is important and not 'on the radar' then the radar, not the groups, needs adjusting, • Opting out for ideological reasons – avoid hierarchy or anarchism!
<p>Other ideas/views</p>	<p>Other ideas/views</p>	<p>Other ideas/views</p>

Exercise 3: Research Issues

The final exercise focused on research issues for the 'below the radar' work-stream. These were:

- Key research questions for the coming four years when working with small organisations and more informal sector activities
- The challenges the work will face – in terms of both methods and sampling strategies that are appropriate for small groups
- What those groups involved in the more long term research can expect of TSRC – and vice versa.

Exercise: Research Questions

Below the Radar organisations: what are the key research questions - over the next 4 years?

- What activities do below the radar groups get involved in (and why): are BTR organisations best-placed to deliver these?
- What is the impact of external change (economic, social, political, cultural, environmental) on BTRA over the next 4/5 years
- How/do different types of funding affect the way groups organises itself, e.g. volunteering becoming more formal?
- How are decisions made within these organisations?
- What is the relationship between above and below the radar third sector groups,

- What are the lifecycles (and the factors that affect these) and trajectories of BTR groups? And what drives each stage?
- Why are groups below the radar?
- How do concerns of below the radar groups get taken up by policy makers? What is the interface between policy and community (don't assume there is one/groups want one)?
- How do groups perceive themselves at the early stages?
- What types of support are needed/wanted (financial/other)?
- What barriers/obstacles hold them back?
- What is unique/particular to them?
- Developing measures of impact that are meaningful to the sector itself
- What are the relevant impacts of below the radar activities?
- Infrastructure support and partnerships - how do groups experience these?

Further questions

Exercise 2: Methods, Sampling and Challenges

Below the Radar Organisations and Activities: Research Methods, Sampling and Challenges

- Meaningful participatory research methods to be used - need quantitative as well as more in depth 'representative' samples for qualitative work. What does a 'representative sample' of this diverse sector 'look like'?
- Build on ongoing studies – do not reinvent wheels but get beyond lists!
- What are we measuring and who has defined this?
- It is important to ask many of the same questions that are asked of mainstream organisations
- Working at the micro level important - national studies fail
- Define the scope of the research - national datasets skewed to medium/large - be clear about the boundary between BTR and larger organisations
- - build on past studies
- Is measurement driven research possible or desirable with below the radar activity?
- Should we bring groups above radar or 'reset the radar'? Bring issues onto the radar rather than groups
- Should we drop 'radar'? - top down approach
- Research projects to come from communities - need to reflect experience/issues - but not the only thing to set the agenda
- We should research the eco-systems/environment that supports community groups

Other suggestions/challenges

Exercise 3: Mutual Expectations

Below the Radar organisations and activities: Research Participants - what is the TSRC 'ask' and what is the 'offer'?

ASK

- Make formal agreements which are clear about the benefits to the participants
- Clusters of activity so groups can learn from each other
- Who is doing the research - people who are credible, e.g. female for female, black for black etc? An important question if trying to research 'hard to reach' groups
- Offer incentives – though these may vary from group to group
- Groups can get involved at different levels: different tiers of what can be expected in terms of time etc
- Respecting ground rules and ownership of data
- Range of ways in which people can participate - from answering one key question, online surveys, interviews, etc.
- Clarity on what research involves
- Think carefully about who to engage and how (gender/age/ethnicity etc.) and who is not.

OFFER

- Be clear about the intention of the research; ensure that there is an ethical process; what are the benefits to participant – this needs to be clear from the start
- Developing principles on partnership working between the researchers and 'the researched' - including early sharing of findings and outcomes
- Enhance capacity for groups to conduct own research
- Produce bespoke community sector focussed reports in addition to research reports in a language that is useful for community groups

Other Suggestions/Comments

Next Steps

Over the summer of 2009 the below the radar work stream will be:

- Publishing a short paper on how current research defines 'below the radar' organisations and activity in the third sector. This is very much a 'working paper' and further comments and discussion is welcome
- Undertaking two 'micro-mapping' exercises to identify 'below the radar' activity in communities in Birmingham and Bury. Work on rural aspects of mapping will commence in the Autumn and discussion papers on this will also be produced
- Producing conference and workshop materials for wider dissemination towards the end of 2009
- Conducting key national level interviews with agencies, policy makers and researchers involved in working with small community organisations. Again papers from this work will be available in late 2009.

Materials on this and other TRSC research work streams is available at
http://www.socsci.bham.ac.uk/research/Third_Sector_Research_Centre/

For further information – and discussion – please contact:

Jenny Phillimore	J.A.Phillimore@bham.ac.uk
Angus McCabe	A.J.McCabe@bham.ac.uk
Andri Soteri-Proctor	A.SoteriProctor@bham.ac.uk